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THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAY

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Under the living conditions with which the masses of our people are surrounded, the playground is an important factor in race development. In America the trend is from the country toward the city, and each year shows a greater proportion of her whole population dwelling in the cities. The movement is economic and certain and the causes are easily recognized, although the effects are not yet fully apparent. We comprehend that the wear and tear of the mills, and the stress and strain of the factories, tell not only on the machine, but also on the workers—men, women and children. The machines are repaired or cast into the scrap heap. What becomes of the men, women and children?

The story is most completely told from English experience, where the same forces of city life have been operative for a longer period. When the steam cotton gin and power loom were introduced into England about the time of the American Revolution, another revolution of even deeper significance was inaugurated—the industrial revolution. The factory system began. The people who from time immemorial had worked in their own homes in town and village flocked to the factories in the cities. The cities of course increased in population and the workers were huddled together in rapidly congesting districts. Concomitant increase in disease, vice and crime are noted in contemporary annals.

Thousands of children of tender age entered the doors of toil in mill and factory. The working hours were twelve, thirteen or even fourteen hours a day for men, women and children. Children from seven years of age upwards were engaged by the hundreds from London and other large cities and set to work in the cotton-spinning factories of the North. In busy times they were often arranged in two shifts, each working twelve hours at a stretch, one shift by day, the other shift by night. It was a common saying that "their barrack's beds never grew cold," one shift climbing into

bed as the other got out. Profits were high, trade flourished, "England became the richest and most prosperous nation in the world." There was no provision for rest or recreation and there was little time for either.

Not until 1802 was an act of Parliament passed prohibiting the employment of pauper children under nine years of age in cotton mills, and reducing the hours of labor of older pauper children to twelve hours a day and forbidding night work. This law applied only to a small part of the working children. The rest of the children continued at the mercy of the same conditions. The impairment of the vitality of that generation does not need to be imagined. It is written large on the pages of history.

Not until 1844 was the first step taken in the protection of women from those hours and conditions of labor which were insidiously undermining the vital foundations of the English people. By an act of Parliament twelve hours a day was made the limit for women's labors, and night work was forbidden. The necessity of such protection is shown by the fact that in 1839 out of 31,632 workers in the worsted mills more than half were under eighteen years of age, and of the remaining adults eighty per cent were women. Child labor regulations lagged behind the necessities of the case. All attempted legislation regarding the hours or conditions of labor of men failed to pass.

The glitter of trade-won gold blinded England to the pallor of her people. When her sight returned the passing years had sapped the vitality of her fathers and mothers. Unhealthy, crowded, overburdened city life had left its grim and undeniable mark on haggard women, dwarfed men and bloodless children. The "submerged tenth," which to-day divides with "Dreadnoughts" English political solicitude, had been propagated under the same forced conditions which are present in many American industrial cities to-day. The factories and mills of England consumed its human machinery. Cheap labor and high profits were the main considerations of political policy. Child labor and race deterioration were the results.

When England put her army into the field in the Crimean War in 1853 the minimum standard of height for her infantry was five feet six inches. Thirty years later, in 1883, the standard had been lowered to five feet three inches. In 1900, when the transports were

filled with recruits for South Africa, another inch was pared off the height, and before the end of the campaign "five feet in stockings" passed muster. Weight and girth of chest had decreased correspondingly. "One-third of the whole number of enlisted men in the Boer War fell short of the standard of 136 pounds which had been required of the preceding generation. Fifty per cent of the London youths who offered themselves as recruits were rejected as unfit, even after the standards had been lowered. Of 11,000 young men examined in Manchester, 8,000 were rejected on account of lack of stamina or physical defect. During 1903 no fewer than 81,723 British soldiers of less than two years' service were discharged as invalids."

The debilitated city dwellers had dragged out the war on the plains of South Africa and threatened the existence of the empire. Stalwart men from the colonies, men of the type the mother country had been wont to rear in days gone by, men of the type which America is sending into her cities to-day—these men helped to save the honor of the English Empire.

We in America are students of cause and effect. We realize that the same causes produce the same effects in England or in America. The process of race deterioration in America is partially concealed by the continued influx of red-blooded, sturdy men and women from the open fields of Scandinavia, Russia, Austria and Italy. These are taking up the burdens of unmitigated toil which have worn and wasted others of equal promise.

All work and no play makes Jack not only a dull boy but a menace to civilization. All work and no play makes Mary not only a dull girl, but a mother of misery to future generations. Regulation of child labor and opportunity for child play walk hand in hand. If one stumbles the other falls. When both fall, the most powerful armaments and the richest trade balance in the world cannot resurrect the lost vitality of the race. We know that the majority of our city children have no opportunity for health-giving play. "In the planning of our cities the children have been left out." One of the functions of recreation is to recreate, to renew. We know that a supervised playground for active, pleasurable out-door exercise within the daily reach of every city child is necessary to continue the stalwart, virile, work-a-day race upon which the greatness of America depends. This is the social significance of play.

We Americans measure the value of play and playgrounds less by the soldiers than by the men and women they help to produce. We are partly led by considerations of industrial efficiency, partly by political expediency, and partly by considerations of humanity. We refuse to sit idly by while our people perish.

Activity is a symptom of life. The kind of activity determines the kind of life. "Play is more attractive than vice." If we give the city boy a chance at "the game," if we provide for him an opportunity to perform difficult feats on a horizontal bar or the flying rings, the juvenile court is deserted for the public playground. Since the establishment of a playground in the stockyard district in Chicago the number of cases of juvenile delinquency has decreased nearly one-half. In many other cities similar results are proven by the testimony of the neighborhood, of the police, and of the courts. In terms of social significance it may be said that a playground built to-day saves the building of a jail to-morrow.

One summer afternoon the writer observed a "gang" of boys at play in the city streets. The play resources of the street consisted of a pile of bricks and a policeman. The policeman, probably from past experience, realized the significance of the inter-relation. A stray breeze came from one direction. As the policeman turned to face it, a stray brick came toward him from the opposite direction. There was a great scurrying as the gang scattered. The policeman labored down the street, peered up the alleys, mopped his glistening brow and sighed ponderously. He returned, humid, depressed.

"Well," he said, "what's a fellow going to do about it? If I chase them off my beat, the next officer will chase them back. By and by one of the poor little urchins will get into trouble and be picked up for want of a decent place of play. My beat used to be in another ward, where the kids used to be too busy on the playground to bother me."

The other side of the story came from "Sly," the heaver of the brick.

"What did you do it for?"

"For fun!"

"What's the fun?"

"Say, boss, I was in the ash-barrel. Didn't the cop look funny trapezing along like a circus elephant?"

"But you might have hurt him by that brick."

"Go on, boss; I'm a better shot than that!"

It was deducible from a little conversation that "Sly" labored under the impression that his beneficent city had provided this fat policeman, togged out in his alluring uniform, as an exciting "game" for small boys in general and "Sly" in particular. Fortunately, for all parties concerned, "Sly" and his friends obtained a playground as an outlet for their energies before a broken window or a grocer's stolen cabbage landed them in court. The social significance is evident in "Sly's" neighborhood. Public opinion there now favors throwing a basket-ball at a basket rather than a brick at a policeman. More academically stated, the proper direction of the universal play spirit is a preventive of juvenile delinquency.

It seems a far cry from the ideal of fair play in boys' games to the ideal of fair play in the political life of our democracy, yet it can be demonstrated that the ideals of fair play and team play are important in forming the character of a community.

In the games of the street every boy is for himself. Victory belongs to the shrewd, the crafty, the strong. Team games of the playground require the submission of the individual will to the welfare of the team. Rigid rules inculcate fair play. A boy has the option of obeying the rules or not playing at all. New standards are set up; standards of self-control, of helping the other fellow, of fighting shoulder to shoulder for the honor of the team, of defeat preferable to unfair victory. These standards when translated into the language of political life we call Self-government, Respect for the Law, Social Service and Good Citizenship.

On any Saturday afternoon, a few years ago, the streets of the West Side of Chicago were a battle ground for rough and tumble fights between Italian and Slav boys. National characteristics and international misunderstandings were fertile causes for combat. In any case a fight was the cheapest and most convenient excitement the locality afforded. A playground and recreation center was established. Now on any Saturday afternoon long lines of Italians and Slavs, as well as Hungarians, Scandinavians, Irish and Germans, may be seen at the door of the swimming pool, awaiting their turn—with the peace preserved. On one basket-ball team a German, a Jew, a Pole and an Irishman are playing side by side for the honor of the team. Here play has become a deep, wholesome Americanizing force.

"Fighting an athletic battle," said the head director of the playground, "for the glory and honor of one's neighborhood, as a member of an organized team composed of one's neighbors, is a long step in advance of fighting for oneself against every one else in the neighborhood."

Governor Hughes, of New York, believes that the supervised playground is fertile soil upon which to grow a higher type of citizenship. He has said:

We want playgrounds in order that we may develop the sentiment of honor. In the playground the boy learns without any suggestion of rebellion against instruction and precept and preaching. He learns it because he does not want anybody else to cheat him and he is down on the boy that does not play fair. Thereby he maintains a standard which he must establish in the community, and particularly in our great cities. This is a safeguard of the country and of the institutions of our government.

The social significance of play reaches to the roots of community life. Our American cities are creating playgrounds because they are civic investments in vitality, citizenship and the prevention of crime.